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ABSTRACT

A discussion of new language policy in South Africa, creating 11 official languages and terminating the privileged status of English as sole or co-official language, looks at a number of issues in language policy creation. The framework for this analysis is that language may be viewed from four perspectives: as a problem, a right, a resource, or a symbol. It is argued that the first, second, and fourth perspectives have dominated South African language policy, and that the third is attempting to break that tradition. A brief overview is given of the language patterns of the country. Two distinct areas of language policy are identified: official languages and languages in education. Central themes in the debate concerning official languages are then discussed: the place of Afrikaans; the place of other African languages; and the place of English. One issue concerning languages in education is discussed here, that of medium of instruction. Each issue is examined in its historical and current social context in South Africa. Contains 22 references and a map of South Africa depicting dominant home languages in 1980. (MSE)

Language Policy Issues in South Africa

Kay McCormick

(Paper presented at Sociolinguistic Symposium 10, Lancaster, U.K. March 1994)

1 Introduction

Since I wrote the abstract for this paper six months ago, a new language policy for South Africa has been agreed to at the multi-party negotiating forum and written into the interim constitution (which will be revised during the next five year period of transitional government). In the interim constitution it appears as section three of the first chapter. This gives it a prominence that was not apparent in most political party agendas during the four years of policy formation, debate and negotiation leading up to the acceptance of the interim constitution.

An irony that should not be lost is that all the negotiations were conducted entirely in English, including those which endorsed the termination of the privileged status of English as sole or co-official language (with Afrikaans). We now have eleven official languages.

What I would like to do in this presentation is to deal with selected issues in such a way that I show why having eleven national official languages is broadly acceptable, while the extension of their use for mother-tongue medium of instruction would have to overcome a great deal of resistance.

The new language policy had a relatively conflict-free passage through both the multi-party negotiations and parliament. However, this lack of prominence and of conflict in official political forums does not signify an absence of contentious issues. It is probably only because of the extreme contentiousness of so many other serious issues, that language policy debate did not occupy centre stage in major political arenas. To date, the language policies of most political parties are very skeletal - statements of intent, more than anything else. More detailed policy options were developed and debated in other forums, among lawyers, educationalists, media workers and linguists.

2. Analytical frameworks used in policy debates

In many of these forums debate was based on research, and both the research and the recommendations based on it were subjected to critical and often heated discussion. There were disagreements about substance - which languages should be designated for what purposes; about process - how policy should be arrived at and implemented; and about how language policy should be conceptualised. Regarding conceptualization, the contestants sometimes (but not always) knew that they were proceeding from different assumptions about the nature of language policy (and even about the nature of language), and the conceptual framework would itself become the subject at issue.

Ruiz (1988) categorizes types of language policy in multi-

lingual situations on the basis of their orientation towards language as problem, as right or as resource. I find this framework useful but need to extend it to include language as symbol. As I shall show, the first, second and fourth orientations have been prominent in the history of South African language policies. The third - language as resource - is a late-comer to the scene but may well prove productive.

Another way of categorising language policies is on the basis of the process by which they are arrived at and implemented: top-down or bottom-up (cf Alexander 1992). As I shall indicate, ours have been top-down in the past. The new one is at least attempting to break that tradition.

I would have liked to have prefaced the whole discussion with a brief history of language and power relationships in South Africa, but have chosen instead the more economical (if more fragmented) option of giving the history of each issue.

In this paper, I shall be starting with matters of substance - **what** was at issue - and attempting to explain **why** that is (or was) an issue by contextualising it historically and by indicating the terms in which it has been discussed.

3 Factors in the immediate context

Before I move on to disuss selected issues, I would like to draw your attention to a few crucial factors in the immediate context. The first is linguistic demography. The figures available to us are unreliable in various ways, but for the purposes of this paper they are nonetheless broadly useful.

Languages	No. of Speakers	% of Population
Afrikaans	6 188 981	15.66
English	3 432 042	8.68
Nguni langs.		
Zulu	8 541 173	21.61
Xhosa	6 891 358	17.44
Siswati	926 094	2.34
Ndebele	799 216	2.02
Sotho langs.		
Tswana	3 601 609	9.11
N. Sotho	3 437 971	8.70
S. Sotho	2 652 590	6.71
Tsonga	1 349 022	3.54
Venda	763 247	1.93

Figure 1
1992 figures for native-speakers of what are now the 11 official languages of South Africa (Source: Schuring 1993)

The following map shows the areas where each of the eleven languages is numerically dominant.

Also contributing to the immediate context are the recession, widespread unemployment, inadequate schooling and inadequate provision for adult basic education which together create a poverty trap, and a widespread belief that English is the gateway through which one moves out of this trap. At present it is estimated that 43% of the population are unable to speak it.

4 Issues concerning national language policy

I have divided the issues into two related groups: matters concerning the choice of national official languages and matters relating to language in education. As I suggested in the introduction, there is something of a mismatch between favoured policies in the two domains.

4.1 National Official Languages

Here there have been three central issues in terms of substance:
the place of Afrikaans
the place of other African languages
the place of English

4.1.1 *The place of Afrikaans*

The language policy issue that has provoked the most widespread and heated debate is the place of Afrikaans. This is an issue primarily because of the incompatibility of the symbolic values associated with Afrikaans. On the one hand it is cherished as a central symbol of a powerful group's identity, and on the other it is detested for its association with the creators and executives of apartheid policies.

It needs to be said that this kind of facile polarization has angered people who are Afrikaans-speaking but who were oppressed under apartheid. They constitute about half of the people who claim Afrikaans as a home language - they are those who were classified coloured and disenfranchised. They contest the double marginalization inherent in this polarization: by the white nationalists who appropriate Afrikaans as their symbol, and by the opponents of Afrikaner nationalism who do not see that Afrikaans is also one of the languages of the oppressed.

Afrikaans has a long history of being a rallying symbol in political struggles. Since the 1870s it has been an important symbol of group identity for its white native-speakers in their struggle to throw off political, economic and cultural domination by the British. They campaigned to change the image it had as an inferior variety of Dutch, and to elevate its status nationally. In this they were successful, culturally, in education and in political structures. Since 1925, when it was declared co-official language with English, there has been a systematic effort to extend its use among non-native speakers. The methods of doing this have been widely resented and felt to be oppressive, particularly after the Nationalist government came to power in 1948. (The consequences for education policy will be discussed below.)

By 1990, among those who wished to see the official status of Afrikaans retained, there was division over the best strategy to use. Those on the extreme right wing continued to argue for its sacredness as symbol of group identity. To others it was apparent that the cause of preserving the status of Afrikaans would be served better by moving the emphasis from symbol towards the realm of rights, or of pragmatism.

The Rights lobby want to see a justiciable Bill of Rights with clauses covering language rights. Some claim that language rights are group rights, others that they are individual rights. Both lobbies have encountered obstacles in terms of people's attitudes towards their arguments. The group rights argument is suspected of being an apartheid strategy in disguise, and the individual rights argument meets with scepticism regarding its implementability.

The pragmatists' argument for retaining the official status of Afrikaans seems to proceed from an orientation towards multilingualism as a problem requiring a solution. Simply put, it goes something like this: Afrikaans may have been used oppressively in the past, but one of the undeniable outcomes is that a huge number of blacks speak can now speak it. To remove it as an official language would disempower them. Afrikaans is a language of access to power and resources, and should be left in place for this reason. (The same kind of argument, proceeding from the same orientation towards multilingualism as a problem, is advanced - by a different set of people - in support of maintaining and promoting the use of English as a lingua franca.)

Opposition to the retention of official status for Afrikaans has been based on the belief that past imbalances and injustices need to be redressed. There were varying degrees of dispassionateness in these arguments. Some popular calls for the demotion of Afrikaans carried hints of a wish for punishment or revenge ("Deprive them of easy official communication and see how they like that!"). Others leaned more heavily on the notion of redress of historical imbalance ("Remove Afrikaans from official language status and replace it with one of the African languages which Afrikaners helped to sideline").

Probably all of these arguments were in the minds of the negotiators who agreed to retain official status for Afrikaans while extending that status, nationwide, to the previously marginalized indigenous languages.

4.1.2 *The place of other African languages*

Ironically, it was Apartheid which first promoted the use of the other nine African languages as official languages, but it did so as part of a fundamer ally repressive strategy of divide and rule. This context has d to ambivalence about their current status as official languages in the Homelands. Prior to the creation of the Homelands or Bantustan structures (which are currently unravelling or being undone), African languages had a long history of being marginalised. Six years after the Dutch East India outpost was established at the Cape, one of its offi-

cials compiled a Khoi vocabulary (in the Greek alphabet, for reasons that are not apparent) and offered it to the Company's governors, with the purpose of facilitating communication with the Khoi. Their response was a foretaste of the future: they rejected its use, saying that "The natives should learn our language, not we theirs." And that, pretty much, has been the postion taken by the dominant groups ever since, including the period of Apartheid rule which gave African languages status only in the Homelands, and which did not encourage speakers of other languages to learn them.

In language policy debates in the late eighties and early nineties, the issue was not whether the status of African languages (apart from Afrikaans) should be raised, but whether all should be raised equally, nationwide. It seemed to be very widely accepted that language rights were not at issue here, but that implemetability might be a problem. The debate has been conducted largely in terms of rights and the logistics of their implementation, rather than in terms of the languages as symbols or resources. However, as I shall argue, symbolic associations have limited the range of acceptable options, and the enthusiasm with which some are pursued.

Perceptions of African languages as symbols are fraught with past and more recent political associations between language and ethnicity. Apartheid used all African languages as key markers of ethnicity for purposes of determining who had to go and live in which homelands. And, more recently, Zulu has been strongly associated with the Inkatha Freedom Party (in spite of the fact that the constitution of the movement was altered about twenty years ago to remove specific reference to Zulu). Had this association not been so strong, Zulu, which has the highest number of native speakers and was also widely used as a lingua franca by blacks, might have been a practicable choice for co-official language with English and Afrikaans, in a dispensation with fewer official languages.

Particularly with the ideologically rather odd alliances that are currently being formed between white and black rightwingers, one does not hear any sentiments against the elevation in status of African languages even from white racist groups. The public tone is one of reasonableness in recognising the rights all to use their own language. Advocacy of other citizens having to learn the newly recognised languages as additional languages is less conspicuous, but it is there, particularly in some education forums and non-governmental organizations. Their advocacy proceeds mainly from two not incompatible bases: the wish to redress imbalances, and a concern to use all available means to promote understanding among groups previously separated. (These concerns are behind some of the recommendations for language curricula in schools.)

4.1.3 *The place of English*

In comparison with the other two issues, this one has - in my estimation - had less energy invested in it overall, and there have also been fewer people or groups engaging seriously in

critical discussions of the place of English. As I said earlier, there is an enormously powerful and pervasive image of English as the gateway to a better life, and a correspondingly strong grass-roots demand for access to English proficiency. Among the general public, few people seem to want to modify its status or reduce the scope of its functions.

In the past its dominance was vociferously and fairly effectively opposed by white Afrikaner nationalists. Now, however, their oppostion to the de jure and de facto status of English is not conspicuous. This is either because that is perceived as a losing battle, or because an argument for the preservation of Afrikaans as an official language would be a non-starter if English were to be demoted.

Probably the most sustained argument that the dominant position of English needs to be challenged has come from some academics and from a non-governmental organization, The National Language Project. At conferences, in policy-making bodies and in many issues of their journal, the National Language Project has warned of the dangers of accepting uncritically the current dominance of English. As I shall show below, this dominance has also been contested by educators in debates about language policy for education. I won't rehearse the arguments here - they are probably familiar to you as they have been raised in other former British colonies and in countries feeling the linguistic and cultural effects of western imperialism.

Because of these political tensions, the only acceptable option was to say that all eleven major languages should be accorded equal recognition. It was clearly not deemed desirable to raise the practical viability of this decision during the political negotiations. But now it must be raised, and, over the last three months the centre of debate about language policy has been shifting from substance to process - **how** is the new policy (which is really only a policy framework) to be fleshed out, implemented and monitored, and **who** is going to do it. And thes questions are not just about logistics, but also about how the process can be democratised.

5 Issues concerning Language in Education

I was one of the coordinators of a research group in a nationwide research project set up in 1990 to look at policy options for different aspects of a new education system. In the language policy research group the issues we identified included the following:

* medium of instruction
* which languages shall be studied, compulsorily, at school
* governance and language policy within educational institutions

I will deal only with the first now but will be willing to answer questions about the other two later.

5.1 *Medium of Instruction*

This is where one sees tensions and contradictions between what receives wide support in the national domain - equal status for African languages - and in the domain of education - greater promotion of English. One can understand the anomaly only if one looks to the history, the complexity of which can't be captured in a brief summary. Medium of instruction policy has been a site of more intense and widespread concern than any other language policy issue. I can deal with only its recent history.

The 1976 Soweto Uprising drew the world's attention to the inequities of the differential medium of instruction policies for schools serving different race groups. The Soweto students' revolt against the imposition of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in secondary school for some subjects - others were taught in English - was met by police violence and led to considerable loss of life. This happened not only on June the 16th, the day of the now famous march, but later and in other areas where rage and resentment spilled over about the injustices of differential medium of instruction policies and the crippling racial discrimination of which they were a symptom. What led up to it?

In 1952 the apartheid government removed control of education for blacks from the missionaries and vested it in a newly created state department. Whereas missionaries had, by and large, taught through the medium of English, the new department then extended the use of mother-tongue medium of instruction for African children to the end of their primary schooling. This was then to be followed by a three-language medium of instruction policy: English for some examinable subjects, Afrikaans for others, and the home language for non-examinable subjects. (No other children had to use three media of instruction. The policy for whites, coloureds and Indians was that they should have mother-tongue instruction throughout their schooling. Indian children were assumed to be English-speaking.)

Since the education provided for blacks by the state was manifestly inferior in all respects, the mother-tongue language policy was tainted in the eyes of black parents, teachers and pupils. They could see that more educational resources - for example books - were available in English, and that access to further education and to well paid jobs was more readliy available to those who had had English-medium education than to those who had not. The apartheid policy of ghettoizing blacks residentially limited the possibilities of learning English informally. It had to be done through the schools, and many people believed that encountering the language as a subject only was insufficient. They wanted English as medium of instruction, too.

The authorities controlling black education had never given parents a say in the choice of medium of instruction policy. That changed early in 1992, when the state department responsible for black education offered parents the choice of three medium of instruction options: English from year one; mother-tongue to the end of year four, followed by an abrupt change to English from year five (this was the existing policy); or gradual shift from

initial mother-tongue instruction to English medium instruction. Mother-tongue instruction (in an African language) throughout schooling was not on offer. Nor was there any public response that suggested that it would have been desired. Knowing the history and the current context, this is not surprising.

Believing that their own experience, coupled with a lack of information about the relative merits, in theory, of mother tongue versus L2 education might lead parents to choose the Straight for English option in situations where the outome would have been likely to have been poor, the NEPI researchers made relevant information available and offered to discuss issues with teachers and parents. It was clear during those months, that medium of instruction was still a burning issue on a scale not matched by other language policy issues. Above all people want the right to good education, and if that is perceived as being available through a language other than one's home language, people want the right to choose not to have their education in their home language. This is recognised in the ANC's draft guidelines for language in education policy which state that noone should be compelled to accept as medium of instruction a language that they do not want. Even if this is their home language and a language which the new policy vows to protect and promote.

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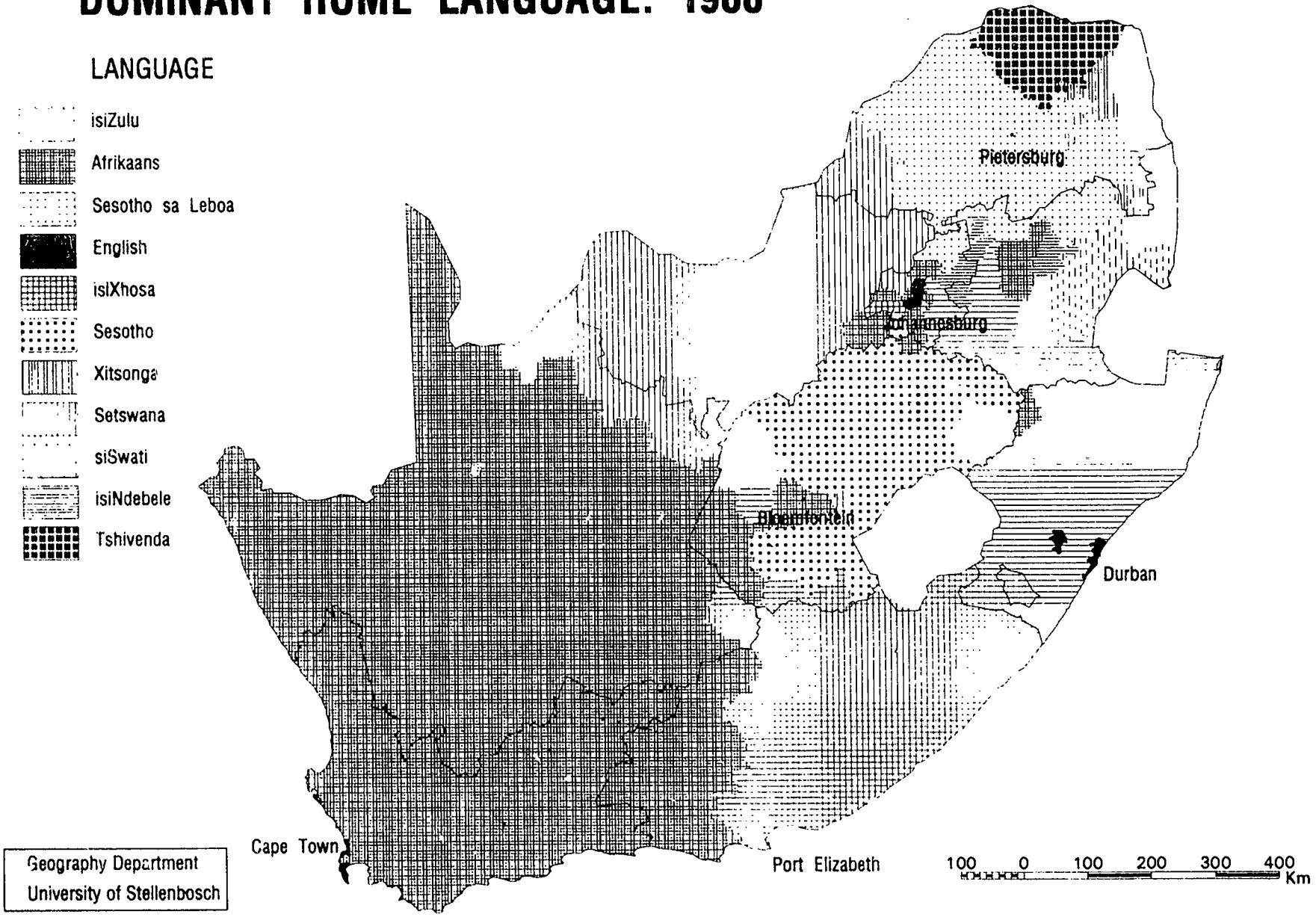
DOMINANT HOME LANGUAGE: 1980



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